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ABSTRACT

Because technology has changed entertainment, what was once simply a humanistic art form has turned into a large industry. Everyone from politicians to corporate executives is using theater technology to get his or her message out in the most powerful way possible. Two primary points in preparing theater graduates to enter this industry should be: (1) that they have a broad knowledge base in liberal arts and (2) they must be able to synthesize everything from a passage from Shakespeare, to conflict resolution, to understanding federal and state regulations, to programming an automated lighting system, to negotiating with a teamster. While there may be specialists in all these areas, theater graduates will need to communicate and understand a variety of knowledge and be able to synthesize it in service of the successful event. This requires not just information, but the ability to learn and adapt for the duration of their careers. The mastering of change will be the key to success in the future of the industry. .(CR)

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The Training of undergraduates in theater technology and design; What the industry expects.

By Stan Kaye

Presented to the National Communication Association

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Chicago, Illinois

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Everyone knows we are living in a time of extraordinary change. Only fifteen years ago my response to the question; Should I go into show business? was clear. My well-rehearsed answer would have been, if you can be happy doing anything else, do it. The ability to make a living in the field is slim, pursuing this field should only happen if you cannot find happiness elsewhere.

Today, my response is different. It only began to change five years ago, as we entered the "computer revolution" or the "information age." The cottage industry I grew up with has become corporate, in a big way. A statistic that is still difficult for me to believe is that the second largest export of the nation after agriculture is entertainment. Due to the boom in communications, our industry is booming. I grew up on the legitimate theater, Broadway, and off-Broadway. Today we must broaden the definition of theater to include this list of potential employers. Some examples are; legitimate theater, studio and independent film, network and cable television, corporate television, rock and roll, country music, theatrical touring, themed entertainment, casinos, cruise ship entertainment, broadcasting, amusement parks, corporate shows and presentations. What was once simply a humanistic art form has turned into an industry, and a large one at that!

It shall not be my intention to discuss the merits of this evolution. The change has happened and is happening all around us. My concern is how this affects our graduates, and how we prepare them.

In much the same way that mass media has influenced politics, technology has influenced entertainment. Weather we approve or disapprove of the change is a moot point. The change has occurred.

In much the same way that the church used the theater in the middle ages to spread the word of religion, entertainment is again being used to spread whatever message one wants to send. However, it is more sophisticated that it has ever been.

Everyone from politicians to corporate executives is using theater technology to get their message out, in the most powerful possible way. It is the students that I train who design and operate this technology of communication, and it is those students that I wish to address next.

Andrea Randall-Cassidy is the director of live events for Universal Pictures theme park in Hollywood California. I asked Andrea the first thing she does when going about hiring a new person for her 40 person staff of live event stage managers. "I have two stacks of resumes on my desk, one with bachelors' degrees and one without, my eyes never even see the ones without the degree" she says, "I do not have time." Essentially she believes that the completion of the degree program says something about the kind of person you are. At a fundamental level, completion of the degree program means that you can complete a task, an essential quality in this field. On a deeper level it tells her that the individual has an understanding of more than just their discipline, a quality she holds in high esteem. She recognizes that the successful completion of the degree program, regardless of the major, speaks to the individual's ability to analyze a situation and take an appropriate action, essential in the entertainment industry. No longer is technology simply task oriented. The technology has become very sophisticated. A broad based education is essential. In a typical day at Universal, one of Andrea's crew will use skills that include, writing, accounting, scheduling, managing, carpentry, conflict resolution, federal and state regulations, fire safety, electrical work, mechanical engineering, waste disposal, crowd control and security. While there may be specialists in all these areas, they will need to communicate and understand a variety of knowledge and be able to synthesize it in service of the successful event.

Only through a thorough broad based education can such a complex matrix of people and machines be managed correctly. Beyond that, they must be able to integrate the knowledge.

Integration of knowledge is difficult to teach in a traditional classroom. I believe it can only happen effectively in a studio environment. The integration is a synthesis of all the various elements that come together to form a "production" or a communication event. This synthesis requires a deep understanding by the technologist or designer of each element and a macro understanding of the whole event. This sensibility is key to their success. It is understood best at the point when theory meets practice. This occurs in the studio, the theater or the shops.

More and more the lines between disciplines are getting less defined. The traditional compartmentalization found in Universities today may not serve the next century. Collaboration is working well in many arenas. One recent example is a collaboration I had with graphic designers at my institution.

It is difficult to predict where the entertainment industry will be in the near future. However, its expansion is difficult to dispute. Entertainment is the channel of mass communication. Clearly we are making the transition from a manufacturing based economy to an information and communication based economy, with that inevitability I believe graduates in our field are arriving in the marketplace at a pivotal point in history.

The technology in our industry is dependent on what happens with the computer and technology related industries that are already shaping the future. There is no doubt that theater technology has become automated, the artistic possibilities are unimaginable and the level of sophistication and management of data is expanding exponentially.

The two primary points in preparing our graduates to enter this industry should be, first, that they have a broad knowledge base in liberal arts. In this way they

understand how things relate to each other and a context within which they can understand the world around them. Second they must be able to synthesize everything from a passage from Shakespeare, to programming an automated lighting system, to negotiating with a teamster. This requires not just information, but the ability to learn and adapt for the duration of their career. In essence, if I were to choose a philosophy for teaching in my area, I would suggest that we prepare our graduates to be able to "manage change", synthesize it into what they already know, and be prepared for more change. The mastering of change will be the key to success in the future of this industry.